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## Ajabu: Nigerian pepper soup

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### Nigerian pepper soup

Nigerian pepper soup is to Nigerians what chicken soup is to the rest of the world. It is the soup Nigerians long for not just when it is blistering cold outside but also at celebrations of every sort; essentially it is a soup for all seasons, which definitely includes Christmas. In addition, it is believed- similar to chicken soup- to be the one-stop-cure-all dish for all ails. It is regarded as an essential remedy for flu and is superb sustenance for those recovering from malaria (and the list goes on).

Despite being called pepper soup, pepper is not its main component and it does not even need to be fiery. I have always supposed that it is the little known, traditional, pepper soup spices that led to this peculiar name. Expatriates or Nigerians in diaspora without access to the ingredients have had to make do with combinations of all sorts to try and mimic the traditional spices. Where I come from, in the *Delta*, pepper soup is not pepper soup without *ataiko*, *uda*, *gbafilo* and *rigije* amongst others – native names for ingredients that are unique to our part of the world and commonly packaged at markets as pepper soup spice mix (although grinding it up fresh gives the best results). At home in Warri where I grew up, we would always add lemon grass leaves (without the stalks) from the

thriving bushes which lend a clean, citrusy flavour to the broth. For those unlucky enough to find themselves without pepper soup spice mix I have included an alternative spice combination at the end of the recipe which will give an acceptable result.

### Ingredients

- 1.25 kg of soup (or hard) chicken cut to bite-sized pieces (a traditional alternative is goat's meat)
- 2.5 l of water
- 3 Tablespoons of pepper soup spice mix
- 1 Stalk of lemon grass, bruised and cut into three pieces, tied into small bundles
- Salt
- 1–2 Bouillon cubes
- Red chilli powder to taste
- 2 Teaspoons of ground crayfish (optional)

**To make the soup**, put the chopped meat in a large pot and cover with about 500 ml of the water. Add a tablespoon of the spice mix, some salt, the bouillon cubes, some red chilli powder, the crayfish if using and the lemon grass bundles. Stir and allow to simmer on a low heat till the it comes to a boil.

Now add the remaining 2 l of water and the rest of the pepper soup spice mix. Allow to cook on a medium to low heat. Adjust salt and pepper to taste and simmer till the meat is soft but is not falling off the bone.

Though ground, the spices still have coarse bits which separate out into two layers – some sink deep to the bottom, like sand on the seafloor, and others ride up and are caught, entrained in the liquid, peppering the surface with their varied colours – red, black and brown flecks of deliciousness. The soup is warm and pleasant with a slight fishiness without the smelliness. There is an appealing saltiness that has an aroma of being well-seasoned, slightly savoury but without the intense

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**Fig. 1** Nigerian pepper soup with boiled plantains, yams and sprinkling of palm oil.

pungency of some African dishes. Serve with boiled plantains, yams and a sprinkling of palm oil (Fig. 1).

#### **An alternative to pepper soup spice mix**

60 g Aniseed pepper (Sichuan/Szechuan peppercorns)  
30 g Black pepper  
25 g Cloves  
25 g Ground cinnamon  
50 g Coriander seeds  
50 g Cumin seeds  
50 g Allspice  
50 g Dried ginger  
50 g Tamarind seeds  
50 g Fennel seeds

Combine the ingredients in a spice grinder and blend till fine. You can store what's left over in an airtight container for future use.

Our guest author Ozoz Sokoh is an aspiring writer/cook who writes her own food blog: Kitchen Butterfly. If you were intrigued by Ozoz's Nigerian pepper soup visit her blog on [www.kitchenbutterfly.com](http://www.kitchenbutterfly.com) for more inspiring ideas.

#### **Conflict of interest**

None.